

Philosophy and the play of life

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Can we think ‘life’ under the rubric of ‘play’ and the playing of ‘games’? What is there about play that allows it to function as a heuristically fertile model for conceptualizing the ground lines of an optimal human existence? And what types of play best exemplifies such a culmination both as norm and as goal? Two remarkable and radically unconventional philosophical works, Bernard Suits’s *The grasshopper: games, life and utopia* (1978) and James Carse’s *Finite and infinite games: a vision of life as play and possibility* (1986) attempt to provide essential conceptual tools for answering these questions. For Suits, working at the beginning in a definitional mode, play is first and foremost to be contrasted with non-play, or work, and then examined as to its ‘utopian’ potential and its ability to function as the ‘ideal of existence’ (1978: 166). This approach mirrors that developed, within an admittedly different framework, by Josef Pieper in his enduring *Leisure, the basis of culture* (1948), with which it has deep, but certainly not intended, affinities. Suits’s book is, like Pieper’s, meant to reestablish, in a novel format and with novel means, the ‘classical’ doctrine represented in the Aristotelian tradition which distinguished instrumental activities from activities that are ends in themselves. His book is meant to uncover a kind of ‘grasshopper logic’ that will reveal the formal frames of games and game playing and their bearing on the central problem of philosophy: how we are to live our lives.

Carse’s dense, rich, and allusive conceptual scheme intersects with, expands, and in cru-

cial ways reconfigures Suits’s bitingly provocative analysis of the philosophical logic of play and games. But Carse, unlike Suits’s deliberately anti-Wittgensteinian procedure, makes no effort to arrive at a definition of games. For him the scope or conceptual space of games encompasses all of human existence. Play becomes a generative metaphor or model that is meant to uncover a network of relationships that otherwise would be overlooked. The dynamic opposition of finite and infinite games functions as a kind of analytical engine that generates a whole series of dialectically related oppositions that show how a reflection on play can cast a powerful light on such central human themes as power and property, the nature of the political, the basis of the distinction between society and culture, culture as poiesis not poiema, sexuality, the generative and essentially metaphorical nature of language, and the import of a technological or ‘machine’ mediated relation to nature. The play concept is clearly extended, albeit schematically, to all of life. Carse’s deep and evocative argument and its aphoristic style and at times paradoxical formulations engender a sequence of exploding insights and envisaged applications and extensions in the mind of the reader, who is constantly caught up short and brought to a halt. While one reads Suits with a smile on one’s face, one reads Carse with gaping mouth. His book is a kind of explicitly existential version of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* or a modern evocation of the playful space of the *Tao te Ching*.¹

Grasshopper logic

Suits's arch, absorbing, and perplexing rumination on 'games, life and utopia' takes off from the central claim that "Utopian existence is fundamentally concerned with game-playing" (1978: ix), exemplified in the "model of improvidence" of Aesop's Grasshopper, in whose figure we can see delineated the outlines of "the life most worth living" (1978: ix). As Suits sees it, the Grasshopper is both a "working Utopian whose time has not yet come" and a "speculative Utopian" who can defend the ideal even in the face of the inevitable and clearly predictable death that lies before him. Suits's procedure is to construct, by means of a peculiar fusion of dramatic and argumentative devices, a philosophical definition of or theory of games and "to follow the implications of that discovery even when they lead in surprising, and sometimes disconcerting, directions" (1978: ix). "The whole burden of my teaching", says the Grasshopper, "is that you ought to be idle" (1978: 7). There is a peculiar (Aristotelian) 'logic' to the Grasshopper's position: "work is not self-justifying" (1978: 8). We work because we cannot play all the time, which the Grasshopper considers a purely contingent fact. Absent that constraint, everyone alive would be self-consciously what they "really" (1978: 9) are, Grasshoppers. The Grasshopper reports having a recurrent dream in which is revealed, though just how remains uncertain, that

"everyone alive is in fact engaged in playing elaborate games, while at the same time believing themselves to be going about their ordinary affairs. Carpenters, believing themselves to be merely pursuing their trade, are really playing a game, and similarly with politicians, philosophers, lovers, murderers, thieves, and saints. Whatever occupation or activity you can think of, it is in reality a game" (1978: 10).

The dream turns into a nightmare, however, when the Grasshopper in the dream realizes

that when he converts anyone to his position - that they are really playing games - the auditor simply ceases to exist. "It is as though he had never been" (1978: 10). The Grasshopper has "converted everyone to oblivion" and finds himself standing alone "beneath the summer stars in absolute despair" (1978: 10). Upon awakening to find the world still "teeming with sentient beings after all" the Grasshopper finds the carpenter and the philosopher "going about their work as before" (1978: 10). But he is immediately besieged with doubt. What if they are really making moves in some 'ancient game' whose rules they have forgotten? Having conveyed this doubt to his disciples, Prudence and Scepticus, the Grasshopper, sensing of the chill of death climbing up his legs, bids his friends farewell.

The rhetorical form of Suits's dialogue-like argument, which itself follows the logic of a game, cannot be replicated here. But when 'the disciples', Scepticus and Prudence, reflect upon what the dying Grasshopper has recounted to them, they find themselves caught in a "tangle of riddles". Play is defined as "doing things we value for their own sake" (1978: 15). Work is defined as "doing things we value for the sake of something else" (1978: 15). Play, on this account, would encompass such things as "vacationing in Florida, collecting stamps, reading a novel, playing chess, or playing the trombone" (1978: 15). If, however, play is the equivalent of 'leisure activities' the playing of games would be just one kind of leisure activity. 'Playing' and 'playing games' would not be the same. As the disciples face up to Grasshopper logic, they become aware that the Grasshopper's point was that not just playing, but game playing is the essential mark of the life of a Grasshopper. The quintessential Grasshopper knows that he is essentially a player of games, and, true to his logic, he perishes, just as all do who come to the same realization. What is the connection between the death of the Grasshopper, who knows he is a Grasshopper and that the acme of his existence consists in playing games, and the

death of all those who really are Grasshoppers, but do not know it? Do they perish because of the attainment of knowledge? Can it be that the knowledge that is essential to life entails our very death? Can such momentous consequences flow from the search for a definition of game playing?

The heart of Suits's book is the progressive construction, development, and defence of a definition of games. Let us turn directly to it.

"To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude] (...) playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (1978: 41).²

The characterization of the four factors in the definition - goal, means, rules, lusory attitude - entail, at least at first glance, that games are "essentially different from the ordinary activities of life" (1978: 41), including, it would appear, 'merely playing'. Baseball, chess, golf, bridge, monopoly, tennis are all games under this definition, as are 'Cowboys and Indians', 'Cops and robbers', and 'House', which are make-believe games. Although they all differ from one another in outer form, they have the same logical skeleton. Each one of them is an 'institution' that is realized or embodied in an inexhaustible number of actual games. By a rigid application of these factors to any actual game we can distinguish triflers, cheats, and spoilsports from 'real players'. Triflers "recognize rules but not goals" (1978: 47). Cheats "recognize goals but not rules" (47). And while players, by definition, recognize both rules and goals, spoilsports "recognize neither rules nor goals" (47). The claims of both the game and its institution are recognized by the player, while triflers and cheats accept only institutional claims. Spoilsports ultimately repudiate

both the game and the institution. You cannot 'win' a footrace by arriving at the goal after running through the infield. You cannot induce checkmate by moving a piece straight across a board while your opponent is looking away. You cannot draw a winning card from a deck when the card lies below the card that must be drawn next. While each of these actions would realize the prelusory goal - which is independent of the game - it is clear that one has 'cheated' - ludically lied - in order to do so. 'Trying to lose' or 'throwing the game' is obviously a case of 'trifling', because the prelusory goal is not acknowledged or taken seriously. The cheat suffers from an excess of zeal, the trifler from a deficiency of zeal.

At the heart of Suits's argument is the claim that "games exhibit inefficiency", that is, the "least expenditure of a limited resource necessary to a given goal" (54). What the resources are is defined within the game, such as, for example, strokes in golf or seconds in a 100-meter race. No resources - that is, means - for reaching the goal can be imported from the outside. You cannot claim to have climbed a mountain if you have ascended by helicopter or elevator. You cannot use an electronic homing device to propel a golf ball into a hole. Inefficiency, so defined, is a constitutive feature of the game in the sense that it enters into the formal frame of the game, the 'lusory space' wherein the ludic action takes place, one of Huizinga's main themes in *Homo ludens*. This frame is a set of 'artificial restraints' that we impose upon ourselves. Without them we could go directly to the prelusory goal, but we could not 'win the game'. Winning the game must be a consequence of playing the game: both are what Suits calls "'autotelic' aims" (1978: 78). They belong intrinsically to the game itself and are defined in terms of it. Both playing and winning, as well as trying and achieving (which are not restricted to games), are sought as "ends in themselves" (1978: 79). Generals, for example, can equally value both combat and victory, just as chess players can equally value both the match and

outcome of the match. Process and result become equifinal: the essence of a competitive game (as opposed to what Suits calls the ‘standard’ sexual act, which, he points out, is not such a game). “Failing to complete the sexual act does not imply a winner” (80) or, for that matter, a loser. Suits notes “it would be odd indeed if the standard sexual act turned out to be indistinguishable from a competitive game” (1978: 81). Failure to achieve orgasm is not a ‘loss’ in the way being checkmated is, which is, in fact, an ‘achievement’.

What about games of make-believe? Is there a goal that terminates that sort of game? At first thought the distinctive feature of make-believe games is that they are role-governed much more than goal-governed. But to be role-governed does not mean to be scripted beforehand, as in theatrical performances and ceremonial rituals. These latter are both staged and scripted. But in ‘Cops and robbers’ and ‘Cowboys and Indians’ we have cases of plays that are “cast but not written” (1978: 92), since the outcome of any particular game is not foreseen. Furthermore, Suits continues, there is the further problem of just what constitutes a “successful, or even legitimate” move in such a game (1978: 92). Make-believe could be taken for a kind of “impersonation” (1978: 94). A player at “make-believe assumes a false identity so that he can be playing a role”, as opposed to a ‘serious’ impersonator who is really an impostor (1978: 94). It is the dramatic skill of the impersonator that is the skill appropriate to a distinct class of games (1978: 95), that is, the game of playing roles. Moreover, Suits thinks “there is nothing about dramatic skill which makes it inherently unsuited to be the chief, rather than a severely subordinated, element of well-constructed games” (1978: 95). There might even be an important social role for offering structured social occasions for adults to ‘take on roles’ and thus to furnish “a much needed corrective of our lusory institutions as they now exist” (1978: 95). What does Suits mean here by lusory institution? He first means the institution that is

a game. But it seems to me that he is also making a comment on the ‘range’ of ‘lusory possibilities’ that a society offers. In this way we would have as a social task the construction of a social array of “game outlets” for the development and exercise of dramatic skills.

Can we specify a basic feature of such make-believe games? Suits writes:

“Each ‘move’ (if we may call it that) either is for the purpose of evoking a dramatic response, or is such a response, or is both. But these evocations and responses really are evocations and responses; they are not merely representations of such interplay, as is the case of staged performances. The players are, in a way, writing a script at the same time that they are enacting it” (1978: 110).

Looked at from the social point of view, when we are dealing with a two-role game, we could say that the job of each participant is to provide the other “with opportunities for dramatic responses” (1978: 110), leading to a “reciprocal system of role-performance maximization” (1978: 112). Nevertheless, we can still ask about the validity and scope of the distinction between ‘assumed’ roles, where we are not ‘really’ what we are ‘playing’ at being, for example, a lookout for a group of bank robbers dressed as a boy scout, and ‘proprietary’ roles where, to be sure, we are playing a part - which is an objective structure - but a part with which we can identify. Suits argues that make-believe does not necessitate that the roles we perform are merely assumed roles (1978: 113). We can be what we make ourselves out to be. Make-believe - the imaginary - then becomes constitutive of ‘what we are’.

Can we think of situations where we ‘play a role’ to such a degree that we play it whether the situation demands it or not, that is, independently of their social benefits? A spy or a double agent is engaged in the deception of other people, but we can also imagine cases where a person can only function, perform a role, when other people deceive him. A double

agent is defined by being a ‘sneak’, while a compulsive performer of roles becomes a ‘drag’. Caught up in performing roles that are the core of his identity, the drag ignores the logical demands of the situation. The situations the bore and drag finds himself in are really ‘inappropriate’ matrices for the performance of his roles, while a sneak’s roles are inappropriate to his own identity (1978: 124). Now, in games of make-believe, there is no need to try to exploit real-life situations and no need, likewise, to maintain the distinction between assumed and proprietary roles. ‘Sincerity’ and ‘insincerity’ have no force in a game of pure make-believe (1978: 125). The critical distinction is between a good and a bad move in the game, not the psychological constitution of the players. “For it is characteristic of games that quite divergent personality types can engage in the same game” (1978: 125). The game, then, has priority over the individual player, whose consciousness is structured by the game independently of their personality type and personal prejudices. In this sense the game is an autonomous ‘world’. Gadamer, within the scope of a philosophical hermeneutics, saw this clearly in the ‘play’ of art, which clearly is a ‘game’ in Suits’s sense since it transcends the private subjectivity of the perceiver or interpreter. In fact, the autonomy of art offers one of the clues to how to overcome the pathological situations of sneak and drag, who were caught, so Suits insists, in an existential logical fallacy. Their problem was that they did not realize that they could “play dramatic games without having to exploit real-life situations” (1978: 130). Learning this, Suits notes, ‘cured’ them - or would cure them - of the fallacy.

Suits argues, further, that there are games where one makes a ‘move’ in order to keep the game going and so is following what he calls “the principle of prolongation” (1978: 131), which prevents premature termination or aborting of the play. If a game or a move in a game were defective, if, for example, an expert were playing an apprentice, it might be

necessary to try to ‘shore up’ the ‘rickety’ structure so that the game can continue, so that it can continue to be played, even if, from the point of view of its internal logic, it has a natural termination point, with winners and losers. But the ‘fixing’ of such a game occurs outside the frame of the game itself. In the case of Kierkegaard’s ‘Diary of a Seducer’, however, we seem to be confronted with a game “whose prolongation is brought about by moves in the game itself” (1978: 132).³ The ‘game’ of Seduction can only be played as long as one has not actually seduced the object of one’s ardor. The goal is to keep “moving the finish line back, as it were, so that the race will not end” (1978: 132). Such instances Suits classifies as ‘open games’. An ‘open game’ is one that has “no inherent goal whose achievement ends the game: crossing a finish line, mating a king, and so on”, which are characteristics of open games. Seduction - the “seduction enterprise” - is, to be sure, “an already existing goal-governed enterprise” (1978: 133). But the Seducer in Kierkegaard’s tale exploits it by taking as his game not actual seduction but the process of seducing. He was playing a “two-person, two-role game where the other person was not a player but an unwitting and involuntary performer of the other role” (1978: 133). The Seducer is playing an exploitative game, to be sure, but it is still an open one. An open game is technically defined by Suits as “a system of reciprocally enabling moves whose purpose is the continued operation of the system” (1978: 135). This class encompasses open athletic games (where the moves are bodily maneuvers) and games of make-believe (where the moves are dramatic performances) (1978: 135). There is no “state of affairs” that the players of open games are striving to bring about. “They are simply committed to striving indefinitely” (1978: 135). In a ‘ping-pong rally’, rather than a match of ‘real’ ping-pong, the state of affairs is simply keeping the ball in play, not scoring a point.

The distinction, then, between goal-governed and role-governed games is not ultimate.

It is framed by a further distinction: between closed and open games. “The distinction between closed games and open games cuts across the distinction between games like baseball and games like Cops and Robbers” (1978: 136). ‘Ping-pong rally’ and ‘Cops and robbers’ are both open games. Baseball and Charades are both closed games. Further, while it is clear that open games have goals, can it also be said that they conform to the principle of “inefficient means?” The use of ping-pong paddles depends on the skill of the players and to substitute some sort of machine to keep the ball in play vitiates the game, much as the use of homing devices in golf would vitiate the logic of the golf game. Games of make-believe do not avail themselves of a script, which would be the equivalent of “playing a game of solitaire with a stacked deck” (1978: 137). In a game such as ‘Cowboys and Indians’ it is a commonplace among children that they frequently dispute and argue about the legitimacy of certain moves. Why is that? Suits traces the disagreements to the participants’ not being clear on the distinction between open and closed games. They transform the “purely dramatic conflict of an open game” into the “genuinely competitive conflict of a closed game” (1978: 137). But ‘Cowboys and Indians’ is not the same type of game as football or hockey. More generally, “standard closed games are usually competitive games, whereas open games appear to be essentially co-operative enterprises” (1978: 137). Suits raises a disturbing social point. Are the societies that emphasize closed games oriented toward “success through domination” while the societies that emphasize open games oriented toward “success through co-operation” (1978: 137)? Such a question will become important later when we examine his notion of utopia and the further implications of the distinction between ‘game-playing’ and ‘play’ qua tale.

The ‘lusory attitude’ is the fourth part of Suits’s definition. What is its theoretical status? Suits tries to establish its viability primarily by contrasting amateurs and profession-

als playing the same game. It could be objected, he notes, that the existence of professional game players contravenes the necessity of the lusory attitude. But Suits will argue, rightly, that “professionals are genuine players of games” (1978: 143), to be distinguished from amateurs essentially by the fact that they have “some further purpose which is achievable by playing the game” other than playing the game as an end in itself. Amateurs and professionals have different attitudes toward games. A professional athlete may not be playing - if we mean by ‘playing’ engaging in an activity for its own sake - but he is certainly playing a game. Why? Because he has the same attitude towards the rules of the game as the amateur, although they differ in their attitudes toward the game. Professionals may, and quite obviously do, use a game for their own purposes, but they use it by playing it, and that means by obeying the constitutive rules of the activity. Indeed, they play the game as an instrumentality (1978: 146). Radical autotelism would hold that authentic games must eschew all instrumentality whatsoever. Only amateurs, in such a case, would really be playing games. Suits, however, thinks that the additional consideration of pursuing an end for the sake of another end - that is, for example, playing a game for the sake money or fame - does not entail that one is not playing a game. Professionals do play games. Radical instrumentalism holds that games are essentially instruments to be subordinated to some other purpose. Radical instrumentalism holds that games are “essentially instruments for the achievement of prelusory goals” (1978: 147). But if that were so, Suits points out, radical instrumentalism would be self-defeating. “Excessive dedication to the attainment of prelusory goals has the effect of destroying the games in which those goals figure” (1978: 147) by reason of the fact that one would cheat, break the rules, abandon the rules, if one could. Games are not just procedures for getting rubber disks into nets, breasting tapes, and so forth. They are, as noted, totally inefficient for

that, just as “one of the worst ways to achieve some practical objective - building a house, closing a business deal, gaining sympathetic attention - would be to make that objective the prelusory goal of a game” (1978: 147). Such activities are governed by the principles of efficient action. Games and life, Suits thinks, place equal but irreconcilable demands on us. And between these two sets of demands we must, in various situations, choose. But we must also ask just how definitive and mutually exclusive the choices are.

What, then, is the relation between the demands of life and the demands of games? The demands of life, to which we are all subject, induce the compulsion to work, the life of ants, who nevertheless would have no “reason to work if they achieved a condition of economic autonomy (i.e., independence)” (1978: 153). Now, it is a pivot of Suits’s position that playing genuine (not spurious Bernean) games is “precisely what economically and psychologically autonomous individuals would find themselves doing, and perhaps the only things they would find themselves doing” (1978: 153).⁴ What does this imply about the nature of games and further about the philosophical logic of play and of the play of life?

What, indeed, does knowing what a game is have to do with the thesis that “the life of the Grasshopper must be a life devoted to game playing rather than to trombone playing” (1978: 156)? Why not to intellectual inquiry or to love, both of which, it could be objected, have as much ‘autonomy’ as the playing of games? The point that Suits, through his mouthpiece the Grasshopper, is trying to sustain is that a life devoted to play is “the only justification there can be for work, so that if there were no need for work, we would simply spend all our time at play” (1978: 161). How, one might ask, are the concepts of ‘work’ and ‘play’ being used here? Stipulatively, Suits answers, not descriptively. Suits, by his own admission, is not engaged in a phenomenology of play but in a kind of Confucian ‘rectification of names’. Work encompasses activ-

ity, which is instrumentally valuable; play encompasses “all those activities which are intrinsically valuable to those who engage in them” (1978: 161). Trombone playing, it seems, would in that sense be ‘play’, but it is not clear that it is a ‘game’. While the “life of idleness” is a “life devoted exclusively to intrinsically valuable activities” (1978: 161). But not all intrinsically valuable activities are games. Games and play, on Suits’s analysis, are not synonymous. Games are a specific kind of play. Being intrinsically valuable does not make, for example, scratching an itch or listening to a symphony games. Games, as Suits understands them, involve limitation. Writing or performing a symphony is a game, it would seem, but listening to it would not be. Listening would be play (leisure), but not a game (and not work). But, on Suits’s reckoning, a true Grasshopper would “sacrifice anything and everything to be playing games”, knowing as he does that this is what justifies his existence: engaging in structured activities whose point is found within themselves. Knowing this he “knows everything there is to know” (1978: 163). This seems, however, to be not a description, but a value judgment or even an injunction.

Suits’s argument comes to a conclusion in a final chapter devoted to an explicit charting of the relation between his three pivotal concepts: 1) play, 2) game playing, 3) the ideal of existence (1978: 166). Suits notes that we cannot affirm that play, without conceptual adjustments, can be identified with the ideal of existence. Rather, play “is necessary but not sufficient adequately to account for the ideal of existence” (1978: 166). It is necessary in that intrinsically valuable activities are essential to this ideal. It is game playing that enters constitutively into any complete or even possible account of the ideal. Suits attempts to bring the concepts - play and game playing - into relation by following the Platonic literary device from *The republic*, to wit, that the state is the soul or psyche writ large. In place of ‘the republic’ we have ‘Utopia’, “a state of

affairs where people are engaged only in those activities which they value intrinsically” (1978: 167) and where all economic (and their attendant) problems as well as all interpersonal problems have been solved “by appropriate methods” (1978: 167). What is there left to ‘strive for’ in such a Utopia? What activities are ‘approved?’ Could we say, in good Aristotelian voice, that what we approve of is “excellence in moral, artistic, and intellectual accomplishment” (1978: 168)? Suits’s discussion here is perplexing, for he seemingly tries to demolish all of them as proper activities in Utopia. On Suits’s analysis there is “no room at all for morality in the ideal itself” (1978: 169) for the absence of evil entails the absence of the need for good deeds. Nor is there room for art, since, on the planes of both content and form, it is inextricably connected with the kinds of human emotions that bespeak conflict and lack, which would also be missing in Utopia. And in Utopia there would finally be “no scientists, philosophers, or any other intellectual investigators” (1978: 170), for everything would be automatically and effortlessly known.

It would seem, however, that the notion of Utopia is scarcely intelligible once we grant these anthropologically distressing conditions. But Suits has the Grasshopper insist that it is intelligible and that it is precisely game playing that makes it so. The problem is that Utopia as defined does not seem to offer us anything to do. There is, or would be, nothing to strive for. Everything “has already been achieved” (1978: 172). Suits thinks he has a way out of this eminently perplexing situation.

What we need ... is some activity in which what is instrumental is inseparably combined with what is intrinsically valuable, and where the activity is not itself an instrument for some further end. Games meet this requirement perfectly. For in games we must have obstacles which we can strive to overcome just so that we can possess the activity as a whole, namely, playing the game. Game playing makes it possible to retain enough effort in Utopia to make

life worth living (1978: 172).

But, Suits asks, could we take otherwise instrumental activities as ends that are valued in themselves? What if Utopia has not banished all objectively instrumental activities but only “all activity which is not valued intrinsically” (1978: 173)? The “exertions of productive labor” would then be available to any Utopian who wanted to engage in such activities. Looked at socially, such ‘game-work’ should (Suits’s stipulative orientation) be available to all, although in Utopia by definition no one would be forced to undertake objectively instrumental activity. Utopians always do things “because they want to, and never because they must” (1978: 174). Carse will note, in *Finite and infinite games*, that he who must play, cannot play. Suits ingeniously torques his argument by moving from an objective to a subjective ‘take’ on Utopia. Utopia, it appears, is a state of consciousness, not a state of affairs ‘in’ the world. It is a ‘stance’ or ‘position’ *vis-à-vis* the world. It defines the world; it is not defined by it. When ‘John Striver’ in Utopia becomes bored and wants to work at something and thus chooses carpentry and sets himself the task of building a house, he chooses a house whose construction “would give him the greatest satisfaction”, within his abilities but with sufficient challenge. It is the activity of carpentry, not the actual house, that is the goal of his endeavors. Just as it is the activity of playing golf and not the dropping of balls into holes that defines it as the game that it is. And when in Utopia, where the solutions to all intellectual problems are already known, ‘William Seeker’ tries to ‘work the answers out for himself’, he is, in effect, playing a game. The activities are - in light of their goals of ‘having a house’ and ‘knowing the answer’ - inefficient, but they are meaningful and therefore not pointless. All the activities which occur in the non-Utopian world have in the Utopian world a distinctive quality that marks them as “quite different” (1978: 175). It is, in the last analysis, a difference in attitude, in the formation of subjectivity. It consists in recognizing

that “all the things we now regard as trades, indeed all instances of organized endeavour whatever, would, if they continued to exist in Utopia, be sports” (1978: 175-76). Not only hockey, tennis, badminton would be sports but also “business administration, jurisprudence, philosophy, production management, motor mechanics, *ad*, for all practical purposes, *in infinitum*” (1978: 176).

Suits asserts, by the mouth of the Grasshopper, that “while game playing need not be the sole occupation of Utopia, it is the essence, the ‘without which not’ of Utopia”. The Utopian vision is of a culture “quite different from our own in terms of its basis” (1978: 176). Our culture is “based on various kinds of scarcity - economic, moral, scientific, erotic”, while the culture of Utopia “will be based on plenitude” (1978: 176). Utopian institutions will not be (or considered merely to be) instruments, but institutions “which foster sport and other games” (1978: 176). Just as the Grasshopper is an “adumbration of the ideal of existence” so the games of our non-Utopian lives are, if not actually paradigms, “intimations of things to come” (1978: 176). Games are “clues to the future. And their serious cultivation now is perhaps our only salvation. That, if you like, is the metaphysics of leisure time” (1978: 176). Josef Pieper, in his *Leisure, the basis of culture*, has delineated a related, but rather different metaphysics, focussed on ‘transcendence’.⁵ But, for the moment, we can ask, with Skepticus, whether John Striver and William Seeker are likely “to find quite futile their make-believe carpentry and their make-believe science” (1978: 177). What if everyone does not like to play games? Are we not looking at the “downfall of Utopia, a vision of paradise lost” (1978: 177)? What if in the final analysis the realization that their lives were “merely games” and therefore not ‘serious’ led the Utopians to think that the carpentry game and the science game were “not games at all, but vitally necessary tasks which had to be performed in order for mankind to survive” (1978: 177). What if, even

though “all the apparently productive activities of man” really were - or should be - games, as defined, no one believed them to be so? And if they did believe it, “they would have felt that their whole lives had been as nothing - a mere stage play or empty dream” (1978: 177). The reason is that “life for most people will not be worth living if they cannot believe that they are doing something useful, whether it is providing for their families or formulating a theory of relativity” (1978: 178). Does this vitiate the Grasshopper’s thesis about the ideal of existence, which is to consist in game playing? Or does it indicate a deeply pessimistic position on the fate of mankind, which will never accept the centrality of game playing for an authentic human existence and thus lose out on realizing the ideal of existence? The eternal battle between the useful and the ‘useless’, between instrumentality and finality, appears here in starkest outline. How are we to so integrate the means into the end that they become a unity, both really and psychologically? Are we irretrievably caught in an irresolvable dialectic? Is the Utopian ideal of existence at all coherent? Is it, in fact, even desirable, much less possible?

James Carse, in his *Finite and infinite games*, gives us some indispensable conceptual tools for answering these questions which Suits fiendishly leaves us with. They bear directly on the central question of philosophy: How are we to live our lives?

Finite and infinite games

The point of origin of Carse’s reflections is the ringing thesis with which he begins his book: “There are at least two kinds of games. One could be called finite, the other infinite. A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play” (1986: 3). This distinction runs parallel to Suits’s between open and closed games, though they are not identical. Finite games, of every sort, are first of all defined by

the fact that they must come to a definite end. Further, central to Carse's conception is the thesis that whoever plays a finite game must play freely. It is a character of all play that "whoever must play cannot play" (1986: 89). The 'experienced necessity' within the game, as played, is separated by a gap from the 'actual freedom' of finite players to step off the field of play at any time" (1986: 15). Play entails, in this respect, a radical freedom: finite play involves freedom within boundaries (temporal, spatial, numerical), infinite play freedom with boundaries. Moreover, although finite games can only be won or lost by one person or team, the others who have participated in the game can be ranked (as runners up of various sorts). Again, the seriousness that is attendant upon playing within any finite game is counter posed by the fact that infinite players, as opposed to finite players, play finite games playfully, not seriously. The reason is that, for Carse, the concept of seriousness is connected with the notion of a script that would predefine the actual outcome of any game. But following rules in a finite game is not following a script. Echoing a central notion of Suits's, Carse claims that "the rules of a finite game do not constitute a script (...) In all true finite play the scripts are composed in the course of play" (1986: 21). This means that during the game all finite play is dramatic, and hence open, that is, not predetermined in outcome. The theatricality of the game comes from the fact that the game has an outcome and thus that there is an 'outside' to it. In this sense, one can understand Carse's comment that "dramatically, one chooses to be a mother; theatrically, one takes on the role of mother" (1986: 20). This is his parallel to Suits's distinction between proprietary and assumed roles. One is a mother, not just playing at being one (1986: 19).

While, as we saw, according to Suits's originally 'objective' approach, as we saw, "games are (...) essentially different from the ordinary activities of life", unless we 'torque' our vision, for Carse it is precisely as games that

such activities are to be seen. In spite of appearances to the contrary, one cannot play a game alone, first and foremost because one is bound to rules, a thoroughly social concept, as Wittgenstein was at pains to show. Games imply, in an extended sense, an 'other' with which (or whom) one is brought into play, even if the play is 'solitary'. Playing by oneself still means submitting to an overarching structural matrix, no matter how simple. Carse's notion of play and games is, hence, resolutely social. To become a self, to play the infinite game of 'selfing', to recognize oneself as the 'genius of oneself' that one is and to become human, is not a task that one can perform by oneself (1986: 45).⁶ There is, in this sense, no 'one person' game. Carse's metaphysical, existential, and social vision is based on the bedrock insight that "our social existence has (...) an inescapably fluid character" (1986: 45). The self is not a thing, an innerworldly object with stable and permanent properties. The 'player', that we are, is constantly brought 'into play' in such a way that it is our lives, and not just (or primarily) the contexts in which we live them out, that are fluid. "As in the Zen image", he writes, "we are not the stones over which the stream of the world flows; we are the stream itself" (1986: 45). Change, streaming, "is the principle by which infinite players live" (1986: 45). This poses us "an unavoidable challenge: how to contain the serious within the truly playful; that is, how to keep all our finite games in infinite play" (1986: 46). To do so would be to arrive at a kind of Carsean Utopia, which runs parallel to Suits's and like it attempts to articulate a normative ideal of existence - whether it can be realized universally or in fact or not.

What are, then, the principal finite games that we should learn to keep in infinite play? What are the consequences of not doing so? How far does the scope and analytical bite of the distinction between finite and infinite games extend?

First of all, it enables Carse to argue that politics, the sphere of power par excellence,

is essentially theatrical, not dramatic. It is a finite game with a vengeance. But, in his conception, “infinite players do not take sides in political issues - at least not seriously” (1986: 49). Rather, they do so dramatically, “attempting to offer a vision of continuity and open-endedness in place of the heroic final scene” (1986: 49). The reason is that for Carse the politics of an infinite player is defined within the space of a further pivotal - model-theoretical or stipulative - distinction between society and culture. “Society”, thinks Carse, “applies only to those areas of action which are believed to be necessary” (1986: 49). In this sense society is the sphere of Suits’s fundamentally Aristotelian notion of ‘work’. But in light of Carse’s thematic extension of the notion of game playing to every sphere of life, the ‘work of society’ is for Carse really a game, both objectively and subjectively. According to him, to think rightly of society is to “think of it as a single finite game that includes any number of smaller games within its boundaries”, such as schools (1986: 50) and other competitive institutions whose functions are not just to confer “entitlements” but also to elicit patriotic efforts from the ‘winners’ to maintain the boundaries of the institutions upon which such entitlements depend (1986: 52). The winners of societal competitions, no matter who they are, will be “those most likely to defend the society as a whole against its competitors” (1986: 52). In this sense, as Carse sees it, society is the domain of property, of titles that give right to property: that is, a system of entitlements. These entitlements are maintained by force, by law, by police, by all the panoptical devices a metaphysical Bentham could devise. The distinctiveness of Carse’s approach is that he holds that property is theatrical, not dramatic, that it has “an elaborate structure that property owners must be at considerable labor to sustain” (1986: 58). Property becomes emblematic by constantly drawing attention to entitlements that have been earned and so must be seen as compensation for the difficulty of winning it. It must

further be seen to be consumed. But how does consumption show itself? Carse rather perplexingly, and perhaps counter intuitively, answers that it shows itself “in the mode of leisure, even indolence” (1986: 61). What he seems to mean by this is that property in the form of wealth is “not so much possessed as it is performed” for an audience that confers legitimacy and confirmation on the performers. The theater of wealth, just as the theater of power, needs an audience - a fact that is apparent to infinite players who, to the utter consternation of finite players, take the seriousness of the pursuit of wealth (and power) lightly. Wealth, property, and power, for an infinite player, are nothing serious. Delimited as they are spatially, temporally, and numerically, they are finite games played within the peculiar compound space defined by power between and over persons and power between and over things. To have a title and to be entitled, consequently, both belong to the social sphere of power. But power is a finite game if there ever was one and it belongs essentially to the finite game of society not to the infinite game of culture.

Secondly, then, society, as the set of all finite games, is itself located within culture as an “infinite game” (1986: 52). Carse asserts quite boldly that while society is defined by limits, culture has no limits. It understands itself as history, that is, “as a narrative that has begun but points always toward the endlessly open” (1986: 52). Culture, as Carse is using the term, is the very opposite of closedness, rigidity, and foreseeability, of scripts and rules. “Deviancy”, he writes, is the “very essence of culture” (1986: 53), which follows no antecedently written script. Cultural deviation is not repetition or return but creative continuation. “Society has all the seriousness of immortal necessity; culture resounds with the laughter of unexpected possibility” (1986: 54) that issues from the unending struggle to make meaning. While societies fight to maintain a fixed tradition and normative interpretation of themselves - going so far as to en-

force it by the use of the police and army - culture (not cultures) does not, strictly speaking, "have a tradition; it is a tradition" (1986: 55). Culture is not (nor is the self) for Carse a 'thing' with definite boundaries. It is the creative process of overcoming all boundaries and logics of boundary settings while at the same time recognizing that humans are double-eyed: they both set boundaries and see the settings as 'settings'. It is the forgetfulness of the settings, or positings, that lead one to become only a finite player in society and in life. "It is essential to the identity of a society to forget that it has forgotten that society is always a species of culture" (1986: 55), that is, a particular configuration of meanings and relations that are by no means necessary.

Thirdly, Carse argues that 'culture' is process not product, poiesis not poiema. True poietai - which we all 'really' are or should be - ignore "all lines whatsoever and concern themselves with bringing the audience back into play - not competitive play, but play that affirms itself as play" (1986: 66). Society - Suits's non-utopian world - is confounded, Carse thinks, not by serious opposition but by "the lack of seriousness altogether" (1986: 66). This is certainly maximally exemplified by the Grasshopper and what society can only consider his perverse logic. Carse's vision of life and of culture is in fact the Grasshopper's. Because it is poiesis, activity, origination - not result or product - "art is dramatic, opening always forward, beginning something that cannot be finished" (1986: 67). As exemplified in art, for example, culture's telic aim is to engender creativity in its beholders (1986: 67), to solicit their participation in the play of origination. While society has boundaries, culture, in Carse's terminology, has horizons. Horizons are creative because they make up the open space of surprise. A horizon "opens onto all that lies beyond itself" (1986: 69). It is an ecstatic structure, in Heidegger's sense.⁷ The infinite player moves toward the horizon, while the finite player moves within a boundary (1986: 70). "Who lives horizontally is

never somewhere, but always in passage" (1986: 70). Setting up boundaries, that is, being somewhere, entails absolutizing time, space, and number, the very marks of finite games. But the infinite play of culture allows us to enter it anywhere and anytime. While any finite game - any instance of finite play - is limited and hence bounded, what undoes its boundaries and thus takes away its ultimate seriousness is "the awareness that it is our vision, and not what we are viewing, that is limited" (1986: 75). Hence the task of the poets - the poietai - is to seek and engender awareness of limits as limits (1986: 76) and not to tie us to objects. In the last analysis, thinks Carse, "one cannot learn an object, but only poiesis, or the act of creating objects" (1986: 78). In culture 'genius' calls out to 'genius' in the mutual enlargement and fusion of horizons.

The important distinction between horizons and boundaries that Carse utilizes is further extended by his cognate distinction between seeing and looking. Bluntly, to look is a mode of vision within limits. To see is the transcending of limits in that to truly 'see' is to see not the object but the positing of the object as an object, or the playing of the game as a game. Seeing, as Carse uses the notion, does not disturb looking. In creating the very outlines of things it knows that they are outlines that have been drawn. Infinite seeing is thus the freeing of vision from the power of the past which defines finite play and its opening toward the power of the open future. In infinite seeing we are touched by what we see; in finite looking we are moved. "Touch is a characteristically paradoxical phenomenon of infinite play" (1986: 90) and is dramatic. Moving, accordingly, on Carse's analysis is theatrical since it is a bounded phenomenon. We are touched when we ourselves, as selves, are brought into play and 'into the open'. We are moved when we find ourselves 'in another place' or within a new set of limits. This becomes especially clear in Carse's analysis of sexuality, which certainly transcends Suits's laconic reference to the "standard sexual act",

though it is clearly connected with Suits's insightful discussion of Kierkegaard's 'Diary of a Seducer'.

Sexuality in Carse's understanding is a phenomenon of touching *par excellence* (1986: 93) and it illustrates in perspicuous fashion the nature of the distinction between finite and infinite games and finite and infinite players. Carse has a stark observation: "Sexuality is the only finite game in which the winner's prize is the defeated opponent" (1986: 95). Finite sexuality belongs to Suits's category of a competitive game, but it is a singularly perverse game, for in sexuality - Carse thinks "only in sexuality" but perhaps we should also include slavery and maybe even forms of incarceration - "persons themselves become property" (1986: 95). Finite sexuality is a form of theater (1986: 99). It is a "veiled" sexuality (that is, a sexuality that does not know itself in its essential possibility) and "as with all finite play, the goal of veiled sexuality is to bring itself to an end" (1986: 99). The "standard sexual act" has as its end, theatrically intended, orgasm. To fail to achieve orgasm is to lose. In the case of seduction, to fail to possess the other person, or to fail to elicit their yielding, is also to lose. But for Carse the very unilaterality of seduction makes the ensuing sexual commerce into a finite game. Kierkegaard's Seducer is playing a finite game even if, in Suits's terms, it is open. Seduction is paradoxically an open finite game, bounded but strangely unlimited. But for infinite players, which the Seducer certainly is not, "sexuality is not a bounded phenomenon but a horizontal phenomenon" (1986: 100). The Seducer is still playing within sexual boundaries - he knows exactly what he is not trying to attain - while infinite players do not play within sexual boundaries but 'with' sexual boundaries, a type of play that is only feigned by the Seducer. The reason, Carse rightly affirms, is that the finite sexual player is ultimately concerned with power, the infinite sexual player with vision (1986: 100). Unlike the Seducer, who hides, or pretends to hide, his intentions from

the object of his ardor, "there is nothing hidden in infinite sexuality. Sexual desire is exposed as sexual desire and is never therefore serious" (1986: 101). In infinite play "lack of satisfaction is never a failure, but only a matter to be taken on into further play" (1986: 101). Carse affirms a paradox of infinite sexuality: "by regarding sexuality as an expression of the person and not the body, it becomes fully embodied play. It becomes a drama of touching" (1986: 102). Touching, in this sense, becomes, as Suits would put it, an intrinsically valuable activity, but as dramatic there is no pre-given script. It is not a means to an end. It is the end, but it is an open end, without a pre-liminary goal. Here, as Suits prescribed, the means are integrated into the end, so that we have an intrinsically valuable continuum of means-end relationships, a point central to Irving Singer's aesthetic configuration of meaning in life.

Strangely enough, for Carse the "triumph of finite sexuality is to be liberated from play into the body. The essence of infinite sexuality is to be liberated into play with the body. In finite sexuality I relate to you as a body; in infinite sexuality I expect to relate to you in your body" (1986: 102). Looked at this way, sexual engagement is a "poiesis of free persons" (1986: 102), which Kierkegaard's Seducer has no intention of engaging in, since true sexual desire would entail the 'genius' of an infinite responder.

Finite games, Carse notes, occur within a 'world'. "World", he says, in quasi-Wittgensteinian mode, "exists in the form of audience. A world is not all that is the case, but that which determines all that is the case" (1986: 108). World is not a fact, but the frame of facts. World is not a thing, but the matrix of things. The notion of world is thus theatrical: it notes a domain that is governed by rules. Games - think now also of Suits's comprehensive listing - have to be placed "in the absolute dimensions of a world" (1986: 108). As Schutonian 'finite provinces of meaning' worlds allow us to "place" games. The "temporal and

spatial boundaries of a finite game must be absolute - in relation to an audience or a world. But when and where a world occurs, and whom it includes, is of no importance" (1986: 109). The reason (and the terminology, derived from Heidegger's hermeneutic ontology of existence) is that "finite players need the world to provide an absolute reference for understanding themselves; simultaneously, the world needs the theater of finite play to remain a world" (1986: 109). Indeed, a world is a theater of finite play. Likewise, each of Suits's games constitutes a world, a Huizingan ludic space, whether agonistically conceived or not. But since worlds are originated in processes of cultural poiesis and since there is no greatest upper bound to the spiraling dialectic of world creation, there is no definite number of worlds (1986: 110). This is a truly utopian insight. But, at the same time, finite players cannot become a world without being divided against themselves or alienated (1986: 111). Finite players consume time, periodize it, stand outside it, and therefore turn it, by dividing it, into theatrical time. "It is not a time lived, but a time viewed - by both players and audience" (1986: 113). Infinite players generate time, live the time, not view it (look at it) (1986: 113). For the infinite player time is 'momentous', a perpetual beginning of "an event that gives the time within it its specific quality" (1986: 114). While the finite player puts play into time, the infinite player puts time into play, and thus engenders possibility. Infinite players, nevertheless, can play any number of finite games and can even join the audience for these games without ceasing to be infinite players. In doing so they join in "the play that is in observing (...). They look, but they see that they are looking" (1986: 115). Looking and seeing return as bounded and unbounded vision, a double vision that marks, indeed defines, the dweller in Utopia.

Carse is also able to bring language into the space of the distinction between finite and infinite play, principally by relating in a new way the speakable to what he, paradoxically at first

glance, considers the domain of the utterly unspeakable, that is, nature itself. The 'play' of language is of course a central theme in twentieth-century philosophy, with which Carse is obviously familiar. Carse's principal point, baldly stated, is that language does not mirror an already spoken (and speaking) nature, so that human language would be in that sense either, on the one hand, derivative or, on the other hand, able to exhaust nature. Nature, on Carse's conception, is speechless. It 'says' nothing on its own but only 'speaks' to us as we question it. We are the speakers of nature, but it is not nature's speech that we utter. It is, and remains, our own. Language, consequently, is not 'bound'. It is a creative semiotic instrument that "remains absolutely unlike whatever it is about" (1986: 123) - indeed, it is itself the source of likenesses, which emerge out of the essentially metaphoric drive of articulation. Metaphor bears unmistakable witness to the truth that the word is not the thing, that reality is not identical with the signs that refer to it and give it voice. This identity would be, in spite of its absoluteness, the identity of the finite. The voice (of nature) remains our voice, not the voice of nature - which is irretrievably silent. We can, as result, never rid ourselves of language: not through an irreducibly right naming (the last word) and not through some absolute technical mastery of nature. For Carse, nature and history are as distinct as explanation and narrative are distinct and both entail very different kinds of language. Such an observation leads to the astounding contention that "if the silence of nature is the possibility of language, language is the possibility of history" (1986: 125), which is essentially dramatic both in its performance and in its 'accounting/recounting'. But, the 'speakability' of history is never total, not able to be brought to closure, for there is no stable or permanently fixed vantage point outside of it for any 'voice of the master'. This has, in the last analysis, deep consequences which transcend the scope of this paper: "the unspeakability of nature is (...) transformed into

the unspeakability of language itself" (1986: 130). 'Unspeakability' entails infinitude, 'speakability', finitude.

The universal relevance of metaphor is found here, for it exemplifies the essential openness of speech and language (discourse), an open game in Suits's sense. An infinite speaker recognizes the essential metaphoricity of language. A finite speaker claims to so have grasped the 'thing itself' through language that it enters the realm of the necessary. But language is not nature. The infinite 'play' of nature is only accessible through the infinite 'play' of language and all the finite provinces of meaning it makes possible. Although Carse does not mention it, this whole set of distinctions is reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty's distinction between originated and originating language, the latter arising out of silence or the prethematic. "Infinite discourse", Carse writes, "always arises from a perfect silence" (1986: 131). "Infinite speakers must wait to see what is done with their language by the listeners before they can know what they have said" (1986: 131). It involves a sharing of a vision impossible without the response of the listener (1986: 131). Infinite speech is an address in the form of listening (1986: 132). "Finite speech ends with a silence of closure. Infinite speech begins with a disclosure of silence" (1986: 133). Storytellers - mythmakers, are, in the end, concerned not with truth but with vision (1986: 133).

Language, then, for Carse is itself caught in the dialectic of finite and infinite games. Finite speech, he devastatingly shows, betrays its own finitude when it strives toward a form of 'Master Speech' - a word to end all words. For Carse this is an impossibility. It would imply having attained a standpoint outside of all discourse wherein discourse itself would be mastered. But we are never totally outside of speech. There is no standpoint either outside of nature or outside of history. Speech itself, as opposed to any particular discourse, is an infinite game, for it has no greatest upper bound. Bound by rules that define the goal

of any particular dialogic or discursive 'move', finite speech must come to acknowledge, and thus become infinite, that it is always situated, an embodied perspective. Because infinite speech emerges out of a matrix of silence, it is not scripted nor can we, authentically, as finite speakers, look upon our speech purely theatrically. Infinite speech is dramatic, not theatrical. Indeed, so dramatic is it that we can be, and should be, and often are constantly surprised by what we say. We speak by listening (to the thing-meant) and by listening to others listen. Finite speech aims toward closure. Infinite speech spirals upward in a widening gyre. In this sense, the essential open-endedness of language brings us into play, a semiotic play, giving rise to 'signitive happenings' (in Josef Simon's sense of that term in his *Philosophy of the Sign*).⁹ While the notion of a 'language game' has been extensively exploited since the dissemination of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, Carse has done something even more radical: foregrounded not just the limits of language (the theme of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*), but the self-aware 'limiting' function of language, its status as poiesis and not as poiema, as origination and not as originated. Suits has nothing comparable here, but Carse has clearly indicated that language (and speech) is the infinite use of finite means. Infinity arises out of (and is recognized in) radical finitude. An infinite speaker recognizes that only by embodying himself in finite means (Suits's principle of inefficiency) and eschewing the vain hope of going directly to the object (cheating) can he 'say' anything at all. And only on this basis can he listen to what he says so that he can actually hear it.

Carse is able to show that even the relation between technology and nature, that is, the control of nature for societal reasons, is subject to the logic of finite and infinite games. A finite game, mediated through 'the machine', aims toward domination, in which nature, by reason of intelligible laws, plays the unwitting role of collaborating in its own control.

The ‘machine’, which for Carse metaphorically stands for the ‘mechanical’ and does not refer to any specific or concrete apparatus, has a peculiar logic that is imposed on all its users. Admitting that prediction is nothing but explanation looking forward, Carse notes that the essence of technology is the reduction of surprise, hence a scripting, a stabilization and closing of the circuit of our relation to nature in light of our needs. But this stabilization also stabilizes our needs as well as, and especially, our conception of our needs, which then become tailored to the ‘machine’s’ logic. The machine not only, quite unproblematically, embodies and mediates our needs but, certainly problematically, yokes our needs to it. In line with his general procedure of situating the finite within the matrix of the infinite, Carse counterposes the infinite play of the ‘garden’ to the finite play of the ‘machine’. The ‘garden’, as interpretative category, metaphorically projects the deepest meanings of spontaneous growth and interiority onto our relations with nature. While machines are configured within the space of ‘moving’, or force and its harnessing, gardens are cultivated or ‘touched’ (and touch us). Gardens, in Carse’s frame, are dramatic, while machines are theatrical. Gardens belong to culture, machines to society. Gardens deal with growth, machines with control.

It is clear that Carse is not engaged in an anti-machine or anti-technological diatribe. It is the dialectic of necessity and spontaneity that interests him, for he sees technology as a maximally finite societal game within the maximally infinite cultural game of making-meaning in the dramatic mode. To ‘play’, quite generally, is to make meaning and to make it precisely in playing. Carse’s point is deeply ecological: any relation to nature that does not respect both the spontaneity of things, expressed in the notion that nature has its own ‘genius’, and our own (cultural) spontaneity (and ‘genius’) as meaning makers encloses us in an irretrievably finite game. Technology itself is a game, in Suits’s sense of that term. Carse’s concern is to keep it from becoming a

closed game, defined by a set of societal meanings and goals that totalize control, prediction, and competition. For him culture is the realm of freedom and openness, the envisaging of new possibilities outside of all current frames. To take the present technological ‘world’ as the world is to reify it, to treat it as a form of nature rather than as a societal choice, which itself is only a species of culture.

“If indifference to nature leads to the machine”, Carse explains, “the indifference of nature leads to the garden. All culture has the form of gardening: the encouragement of spontaneity in others by way of one’s own, the respect for source, and the refusal to convert source into resource” (1986: 151). Gardening frees us from the tyranny of instrumental rationality and obsession with goals. It is a paradigm Utopian activity. “One never arrives anywhere with a garden” (1986: 153). “A garden is a place where growth is found” (1986: 153). Gardening, in Carse’s conception, encompasses: teaching, parenting, working with, loving each other (1986: 153). The logic of the garden even reveals to us what it means to truly travel (1986: 153). “Genuine travel has no destination. Travelers do not go somewhere, but constantly discover that they are somewhere else” (1986: 154). This being somewhere else is the essence of growth. It means treating oneself and others as a source and being dramatically open to no end of variations.

“When society is unveiled, when we see that it is whatever we want it to be, that it is a species of culture with nothing necessary in it, by no means a phenomenon of nature or a manifestation of instinct, nature is no longer shaped and fitted into one or another set of societal goals. Unveiled, we stand before a nature whose only face is its hidden self-origination: its genius” (1986: 159).

I take this to be an echo of Spinoza’s distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, that is, between nature considered as origenerative process and nature considered

as originated, without, however, any claim that there are two natures. They are the two faces of one and the same nature. Indeed, “we see nature as genius when we see as genius” (1986: 159). For Carse “our own self-origination cannot be stated as a fact” (1986: 159) any more than Utopia can become a fact, an actual ‘place’. “For the infinite player, seeing as genius, nature is the absolutely unlike” (1986: 160). It does not feed us without our effort. At the same time it is not the object of mere effort, nor can it be forced. Although, in the Jewish and Islamic traditions, we have responsibility for the garden, this does not mean that

“we can make a garden of nature, as though it were a poiema of which we could take possession. A garden is not something that we have, over which we stand as gods. A garden is a poiesis, a receptivity to variety, a vision of differences that leads always to a making of differences. The poet joyously suffers the unlike, reduces nothing, explains nothing, possesses nothing” (1986: 161).

Carse ringingly affirms that there is no one and nothing that belong essentially to my script. This is his way of tackling the issue of technological rationality and technological domination. It is highly reminiscent of the Frankfurt School’s critique of instrumental rationality, the gradual spread of ‘utilitarian’ demands over the social world and over nature, which is transformed from source to resource, paralleling the transformation of human beings into ‘human capital’ under the sway of a universal ‘productivity’ understood in technological or economic terms. The infinite player is the enlightened and autonomous player. Carse puts his point this way: “The homelessness of nature, its utter indifference to human existence, disclose to the infinite player that nature is the genius of the dramatic” (1986: 161). Being both autonomous and utterly indifferent to us, nature brings us into play in the most radical form possible. We cannot stand outside of ourselves or outside

of nature and hence we cannot, without losing ourselves, play a solely finite game with nature nor with ourselves. This insight is ground zero for Carse, the one knowledge worth having. Recognizing that there is no defined outside, that is, no frame or bounds to our finite boundaries, to our finite games, is the recognition that there is “but one infinite game” (1986: 177). This is the continually performed insight that grounds, indeed, constitutes Utopia. It is the knowledge possessed by the Grasshopper.

Philosophy and the ‘play’ of life

I have tried to show, in shorthand and exceedingly schematic fashion, how these marvelous books engage and clarify philosophical questions of universal scope and exemplify, in both their motivations and their rhetorical forms, distinctively philosophical ‘takes’ on play. They are not only about play - and games - but also themselves forms of philosophical play, ‘moves’ in the great game of philosophical reflection. But they are also philosophical reflections on life and how it should be lived. It is deeply significant that the subtitles of both books contain the word ‘life’. Suits joins ‘games, life and utopia’ together, while Carse details “a vision of life as play and possibility”. Their books are as much existential challenges as intellectual explorations of the topics they so illuminatingly discuss. Their conceptual frameworks and pivotal distinctions are essential components in any attempt to thematize play in a distinctively ‘philosophical’ way.

Suits makes a strong and compelling case for a purely formal definition of ‘playing a game’. Games have prelutory goals, realized by lusory means in accordance with constitutive rules which are accepted, in a specifically lusory attitude, in order to make a specific activity possible. This is, in short, a four-factor definition of games. The exploration of the inner logic of this definition allows Suits to

establish a set of distinctions that can function as the formal frame for any further phenomenological, cultural, or historical investigation of games. Games can be open games, such as ‘Cops and robbers’, ‘ping-pong rally’, and so on, or closed games, such as baseball, golf, basketball, and so forth. Games can be competitive (agonistic) games, where there are definite winners and losers, or cooperative games, where the participants are concerned to offer other participants opportunities for dramatic self-(re)presentation. While competitive games *eo ipso* must be rule-governed (anything does not go, a universal free-for-all is not a game), cooperative games are primarily role-governed, spaces wherein we take on assumed and proprietary roles. Play is to be distinguished from work as intrinsically valuable activity is to be distinguished from instrumental activity. Play is activity for its own sake; work is activity for the sake of something else. It would appear that we work in order to play and that, consequently, play is a ‘higher’ activity than work. Play and work are then related as ‘free’ activity to ‘bound’ activity. Nevertheless, playing is not the same as playing games.

Games involve limitation, but free limitation - or limitation freely accepted, namely, to act in accordance with the demands of the four-factors. Deviation from these factors in various ways makes one into a trifler, a cheat, or a spoilsport. The distinction between assumed and proprietary roles clarifies the relation of games of ‘make-believe’ such as ‘house’, where there is a clearly demarcated inside and outside, to the existential games of a) ‘sneaks’ or ‘impostors’, who exploit real life situations in order to take on and manipulate assumed roles, and b) of ‘drags’, who exploit real life situations (consisting in the responses of others) in order to play out proprietary roles, that is, roles with which they have identified. Suits’s definition allows a clear specification of the difference between amateurs and professionals. The notion of a cooperative game - especially games of make-believe - illuminates the issue of scripts and their relations to rules. Scripts are not roles and rules are not scripts. Scripts entail definition of outcome or result. Rules determine only procedures for arriving at an outcome, not which particular outcome there will be.

Utopia, as Suits wickedly conceives it, would consist in a realization of the ‘ideal of existence’. Such an ideal makes the goal of life not playing, but the ‘playing of games’, the engaging in structured activities for the sake of the activity itself. What stands in the way of Utopia’s becoming a reality? The present world is organized not on the principle of plenitude but on the principle of scarcity. Where there is scarcity there is necessity and consequently involuntary limitation. And where there is involuntary limitation there is no playing of games. Utopia would have to be built on the principle of plenitude. All limitations on activities would have to be voluntary, accepted for the sake of the activities they make possible and apart from the means-end matrix of instrumental action and rationality. All ‘practical’ activities would be unnecessary in Utopia. But likewise all ‘intellectual’, ‘moral’, and ‘aesthetic’ activities that had the slightest connection with lack or necessity. The only thing left ‘to do’ in Utopia would be to play games, in infinite variety and of unheard of difficulty and complexity. There would, however, be no need to play games. One plays freely or one is not playing. One steps into the magic circle of a game in order to play it, but one does not have to make the step.

The main question we are left with from Suits, and in fact the question he himself leaves us with at the end of his book, is whether ‘Utopia’, as defined, would, or even could, be accepted as the ideal of existence by mankind as a whole. Can mankind accept an ideal of existence - something toward which it should strive - that entails the actual abolition of the need to do anything useful (1978: 178)? Can human existence be defined as culminating in activities - the playing of games - whose only point lies within themselves and which are not

'serious', that is, not necessary and accomplish no purpose? Suits proposes, as a possible answer to these questions, that we could, indeed should, consider all - *ad infinitum* - the ordinary instrumental activities and institutions of life as being really games. This would mean making a game, and not just a virtue, out of necessity. It seems to be the deepest implication of Suits's paradoxical argument that if, *per hypothesin*, we are forced to accept the desired or postulated irreducibility of the useful, then we are set a social and personal task: so to arrange the means of attaining the useful that they cannot be separated from the ends pursued. This would introduce constitutive rules and so integrate means into ends that they would form a true continuum and whole. But working with the means themselves would also have to be something that we would like to do, something that we could find ourselves in. This is, in fact, the aesthetic deal proposed by Dewey in his classic *Art as experience* under the rubric of a 'consummatory (that is, non-utilitarian or non-instrumental) experience' and developed by Irving Singer (1992, 1994, 1996), Joseph Kupfer (1983), Crispin Sartwell (1995), and Richard Shusterman (1992), and Innis (1983 and 1987) in various ways.

But, one must ask, in real life situations, would one ever choose inefficient means? One would if there were a deep pleasure or happiness attendant upon the activity of working with the means. The means can become in their own way ends or intrinsic to the realization of the ends. This is clearly the case with 'game-playing', which is the solving a self-set problem and with the play of art (see Gadamer 1986: 1-53, 123-30). But what about 'life-playing'? In the present economy of scarcity - but is it only 'present'? - we must find a way to live with the means given us. We do not set the means on our own accord. They are given by nature and by society as social and natural constraints. Following rules, or utilizing means, entails submitting to mediation, to limitation. We may exploit the rules, but we cannot circumvent them. Therefore, to the de-

gree possible, we should strive to so structure the rules that they are integrated into the activity and become the most efficient means of achieving the goal, given the means. The problem concerns the constitution of means. It would have to be a conceptual decision on the part of mankind to constitutively take their lives and all its constitutive activities and institutions as games and consequently as something that they should cultivate for their own sakes. Suits's point is not descriptive; it is prescriptive. But it does not presuppose that the ideal of existence can ever become a full reality. The ironic and paradoxical tone of his parable in dialogue form leaves us with a Socratic *aporia*. We experience the stupefaction of our own speechlessness at the end of reading Suits's elegant parable, a veritable likely story. Such a stupefaction points to the infinite task of finding a way to mediate between the useful and the useless. If life is (or ought to be) the playing of games, and such play is useless in the sense of serving no other end than in being played, then life is useless in the sense defined. Life's *telic* aim, if not its present reality, is to be played for itself. Consequently neither Sisyphus nor Prometheus seem for Suits to be acceptable paradigms of existence. Suits's model is in fact an ingenious updating of the classical Aristotelian position, but without the explicit contemplative or theoretical bias that attends it. Here is his principal difference from Pieper's attempted rehabilitation of the Aristotelian position, which focuses primarily on 'contemplation' and 'aesthetic' creation in the strict sense of the term. For Suits, we are caught - both really and psychologically - somewhere in between the instrumental and the final, and, not being able to repudiate objectively instrumental activities, we strive to make them subjectively final without totalizing them. Ultimately this too is an 'aesthetic' ideal, but it is by no means restricted to art. It is, given the conditions of existence, an ideal, not a reality. Utopia is not realized in fact, but in act. It is a formative principle of action, not an ever-receding goal of human

endeavor. It is present whenever and wherever means and ends become inseparable and are experienced as intrinsically valuable.

Carse, for his part, makes no attempt to arrive at a definition though he is offering a model in the form of a creative metaphorical projection. The extraordinary analytical power and pertinence of his generative distinctions emerges in the course of their application. Carse relies in his profound meditations on our foreknowledge not so much of games as of the principal human activities that make up the shapes of our lives. He has no fears, as Suits's Grasshopper has, that to look on them as games would entail our 'perishing' or feeling that our lives are fundamentally empty and without purpose. That our lives are really configured, indeed should be seen, as games is not a knowledge that kills, but a knowledge that gives life. As I see it, Carse's pivotal insight is that not only are games finite or infinite, but so are the players of games. I think, however, that the best formulation of his insight is that one can play finitely or infinitely. This is the existential decision to which his book 'calls' us. This adverbial form of definition is crucial: it indicates that the distinction deals with a mode of existence, a way of being, and not with different persons. Neither players nor games are reified in his approach, which matches Suits's formal and logical approach with what we can only call a metaphysical approach. The same person is both finite and infinite player, able, in each instance of play, to play finitely or infinitely. It is, in the last analysis, the ability and the necessity to be both inside and outside boundaries quite generally that Carse wants to explore and to establish. The 'seriousness' of play within boundaries is matched by the 'lightness' and buoyancy of the infinite player who recognizes boundaries precisely as boundaries and consequently lives 'horizontally'. Inasmuch as Carse is concerned to establish the playfulness of the serious and the seriousness of the playful, the seriousness that marks the inner space of the finite game is to be answered by

our recognition of the non-seriousness, or non-ultimacy, not so much of the finite game itself as of the finiteness of our playing of the game.

The set of distinctions that run like a spine throughout Carse's book are also a permanent contribution to and transformation of our understanding of the scope of the play concept and a creative enrichment of our view of ourselves. By means of the dialectical oscillation between the finite and infinite dimensionalities of the games of life, Carse is able to uncover the hidden logic of alternative ways of framing ourselves in, and relating ourselves to, our institutions of political power, property relations, society, sexuality, language, history as lived and as narrated, technology, nature, and their various labile embodiments. His approach, which is as stipulative as Suits's, can be seen as an attempt to 'flesh out' normatively the Suitsian skeleton. In these two works we are asked to take the measure of ourselves individually and socially. They offer us a formative vocabulary of self-understanding and self-realization and not merely a set of conceptual tools.

Notes

1. This is not a merely 'playful' reference to one of the classic works of oriental philosophy. I am trying to indicate the aphoristic, allusive, life-affirming, and provocative, at times paradoxical, nature of Carse's literary form.
2. The use of 'lusory' and its cognates is Suits's own terminological choice. The normal formulation is 'ludic' but I have followed Suits's own practice here and have made no effort to change it. The meaning, in any case, is the same and must under no circumstances be connected with 'illusory'.
3. The 'Diary of a Seducer' makes up the last section of the first part 'either' of Søren Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*. The work is written not in Kierkegaard's own voice but pretends to be the papers of two men, one representing the 'aesthetic' point of view on existence, the other representing the 'ethical' point of view. The

book itself is published pseudonymously under the name of ‘Victor Eremita’ who has taken on the responsibility of ‘editing’ the papers of ‘A’ in Either and the papers and letters of ‘B’ in Or. The preface to that work, Kierkegaard writing as Eremita, contains the following passage: “The idea of the Seducer is suggested in the essay on the Immediate-Erotic as well as in the Shadowgraphs, namely, the idea that the analogue to Don Juan must be a reflective Seducer who comes under the category of the interesting, where the question is not about how many he seduces, but about how he does it” (1978: 9). Here is the direct connection with Suits’s own fiendishly clever argument, which also has the indirect literary form that is exemplified in Kierkegaard’s arch narrative.

4. The reference here is to Eric Berne’s one-time popular book, *Games people play* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), which Suits thinks exemplifies a position of radical instrumentalism with regard to games. Such a position, according to Suits, “cannot be put into practice. Because of the equal but irreconcilable demands of the game and of what may be called life, although it is possible to meet the demands of the game or of life or of neither, it is not possible to meet the demands of both”. Suits further comments: “If the games played in Eric Berne’s *Games People Play* are really games, then Berne is an exponent of this incoherent theory. For the players of Bernean games are playing them only in order to gain what Berne calls ‘strokes’, a stroke being a unit, so to speak, of social recognition (...). But while an athlete gains recognition as the result of performing some feat, for Berne’s players of games the feat performed is the gaining of recognition. Or in the language of my theory, the gaining of recognition is the prelusory goal of the games that Berne’s people play” (1978: 148-49).
5. The reference to ‘transcendence’ here indicates a further ‘dimension’ to Pieper’s analysis that introduces religious and metaphysical factors that are foreign to Suits’s framework. Pieper’s lifelong philosophical project was to establish a ‘space’ beyond utility and ‘work’, where not only ‘play’ but ‘contemplation’ could take place. Contemplation was understood the sense of Aristotle transformed by Aquinas: human life culminates not in activities that are oriented to ends outside themselves but in ‘immanent’ action, that is, an action that ‘rests in itself’ and is subject to a ‘higher’ logic. The ‘finality’ of contemplation lies in itself. One contemplates in order to contemplate, not because contemplation leads to anything else ‘for the sake of which’ it is ‘undergone’. ‘Work’ and ‘leisure’ make up for Pieper the fundamental opposition of human culture. Suits’s project lies within the space of Pieper’s ‘leisure’.
6. Carse’s use of the term ‘genius’ is directly connected with the notion of ‘self-creation’. The self is defined by a process of spontaneous ‘self-origination’ outside of the causal nexus that rules ‘the objective world’.
7. Heidegger’s ‘existential analytic of There-being (Dasein)’ rests upon an analysis of time and temporality wherein the ‘place’ that makes up the ‘there’ of human existence is shown to be not a substance or a thing but a unified structure of ‘standing out’ toward the past and the future ‘in’ the present. Time is for Heidegger the fundamental horizon of ‘being’ or ‘meaning’ within which ‘the world worlds’ and within which we ‘appropriate ourselves’ by ‘coming into our own’ in achieving an ‘authentic’ existence. This remarkable fusion of Augustine’s analysis of time and Kierkegaard’s (and Nietzsche’s) account of authenticity is everywhere present in Heidegger’s early and more accessible works.
8. Singer’s remarkable ‘meaning in life’ trilogy projects an ‘ideal of existence’ that fuses the aesthetic and the ethical. It centers on the ‘creation of value’ and the ‘pursuit of love’ and extends and concretizes the types of analyses found in Suits and Carse, ‘fleshing’ them out, so to speak, by exploring in more detail the various ‘lusory’ spaces in which human beings live out their lives. One of Singer’s major inspirations is the work of Dewey.
9. This remarkable book is a novel and demanding exploration of what in Peircean semiotics is known as the problem of ‘semiotic closure’ or ‘unlimited semiosis’. While it may approach at times central themes and procedures of Jacques Derrida’s ‘deconstructionist’ project it cuts an independent, precise, clear, and unsettling path through the theme of the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of signs without the mystifications of Derrida’s procedures. I have undertaken my own investigation of this general problem in my *Consciousness and the play of signs* (1994)

where I try to establish that the ‘play of signs’ is not a ‘free’ play but is bound up with the conditions of embodiment quite generally.

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